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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000016

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [OSCE](#) [KPAO](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PM CONTRADICTS PRESIDENCY: EXIT POLL  
STILL ALIVE

REF: A) YEREVAN 003 B) 07 YEREVAN 1467 C) 07 YEREVAN

1439

Classified By: CDA ROBERT FRAZIER, REASONS 1.4 B/D.

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) In a hastily called meeting, Armenian Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan told Charge that he still favors the holding of a USAID-funded exit poll during the upcoming presidential election, as long as a key condition be met. Contradicting the presidential administration, which has privately opposed the poll (Ref A), PM Sargsyan emphatically declared that "there is no one on my team" opposed to it. The sticking point, he said, was the lack of access to the polling data while it was being collected and transmitted abroad for analysis. He asked the Mission's help in solving this problem, so that the data could be concurrently shared within Armenia on election day. The PM also previewed GOAM plans to approach "European partners" for similar election-related projects, including media monitoring and a complementary exit poll. He stated that Armenia wanted to avoid the "tension" witnessed in Georgia's recent presidential election, which he partially attributed to exit polling performed by inexperienced organizations. End summary.

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PM SEEMINGLY CONTRADICTS PRESIDENT  
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2. (C) On January 7, presidential Deputy Chief of Staff Vigen Sargsyan called CDA to request an urgent meeting with PM -- and presidential front-runner -- Serzh Sargsyan to discuss the holding of the USAID-funded/IRI-commissioned exit poll during the presidential election on February 19. Acting USAID director, USAID democracy programs director and acting polchief accompanied Charge to the meeting which was held at the PM's office with PM Chief of Staff Levon Martirosyan and Vigen Sargsyan. The meeting was the fourth held on the subject in as many weeks, but the first requested by the PM; the three previous meetings had been initiated by, and held at the presidency (reftels). While the PM has publicly supported the poll ever since the Mission broached it with him in late November, the presidency has stridently opposed it in private, and criticized the Mission for not raising it first with President Robert Kocharian. In the third meeting held on December 28, presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorkian notified the Charge of the President's opposition to the poll, and the request that the Mission not go forward with it. He also asked post not to politicize the

president's decision once it was made public (Ref A). He said the three main reasons for opposing the poll were the GOAM's lack of trust in how it would be conducted, fear that it could provoke instability during and after the election, and concerns that the poll would overshadow the election process itself.

13. (C) Catching the Mission somewhat by surprise, PM Sargsyan seemingly contradicted the president's position on the poll, stating he welcomed "efforts like these" that improved the credibility of the election "in the eyes of our people" and abroad. He noted that he favored the latest opinion poll being funded by USAID and commissioned by IRI that showed him in the lead, opining that "Gallup was doing a good job." (Note: IRI commissioned the poll to the Baltic Surveys, Ltd. / Gallup Organization based in Vilnius to conduct the opinion poll to which the PM referred, as well as the proposed exit poll. End note.)

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THE CATCH: ACCESS TO POLLING DATA  
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14. (C) In spite of his support, the PM said the presidency had informed him of a "strange thing" in the poll's methodology -- the fact that Armenia would not have access to the polling data while it was collected and analyzed. In order to work in a "spirit of trust," he proposed to the Mission that access to the polling data be granted to Armenia on election day as well. (Note: He did not specify which entity in Armenia should be granted access. End note.) He pledged GOAM cooperation in arriving at a suitable technical arrangement, offering as an example the creation of a "second server" in Armenia to receive the data from the Gallup office in Vilnius. (Note: The PM did not go into details on the

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sequence of data delivery to such a server. End note.) He added that Gallup could analyze the data on its own, without Armenian participation, but Armenia should also have a data "archive" made available to it.

15. (C) The PM underscored GOAM concerns about the optic of the exit poll being entirely in the hands of non-Armenians. He said it "concerned us" when the polling data would be exclusively collected and analyzed in an "entirely different place" so that "we will not have an idea of the results." He appealed to the Mission to understand GOAM concerns about putting "the fate of the entire election" into the hands of "one computer operator" in Vilnius. The PM also proposed that Gallup could register with the Central Electoral Commission, a step that would confer upon it official status during the election. In spite of his concerns about the optics, the PM nevertheless stressed the need for an "experienced organization" such as Gallup to carry out the poll. He noted the "tension" witnessed in the recent presidential election in Georgia, partially attributing it to inexperienced polling organizations. He even wondered out loud why a Ukrainian organization had been invited to conduct a poll there, claiming that such a situation "smelled" of something "other than polling."

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WE WANT CREDIBLE ELECTIONS  
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16. (C) Throughout the meeting, the PM repeated his wish that the exit poll's results contribute to a credible election. He agreed with the Charge that exit and opinion polls were an indicator of free and fair elections as well as a democratic society. He declared "we are having elections" to demonstrate these points to the Armenian people, "otherwise they don't make sense." He insisted that the Armenian Sociological Association, the local partner of Gallup which has alternatively been branded as pro-government and opposition (depending on the results of the polls in

question), did not have to be involved in the exit poll, or in the handling of polling data. In fact, he said it would be "much better" if Gallup "ran the whole thing."

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GOAM MEDIA MONITORING, POLLING PLANS  
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17. (C) The PM then previewed the GOAM's ambitious plans for its own media monitoring and polling during and after the presidential election. These included a media monitoring program prior to the election, a pre-election opinion poll, an election day exit poll, and a post-election opinion poll. He said the GOAM planned to request assistance with these projects from "European entities" or "high-ranking" international organizations with the proper experience. He objected to the current media monitoring project being carried out by the Yerevan Press Club (YPC), and even similar attempts by diplomatic missions, claiming they yielded "an incomplete picture" of the situation. The PM said the GOAM welcomed Mission input on media monitoring, and even solicited suggestions on which TV, radio, or print outlets to include in the program. The PM was visibly disappointed with what he had heard during his recent visit to Brussels and Strasbourg on the GOAM's alleged media clampdown prior to the election. He said he told the Council of Europe's Commissioner on Human Rights that the YPC was biased and distorting the true picture in Armenia.

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MISSION RESPONSE ... AND PM INTERJECTIONS  
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18. (C) Charge told the PM his views on the exit poll were encouraging given the fact that some in the GOAM did not support it. At this point, the PM emphatically interjected that "no one on my team" opposes it. The Charge noted to the PM the Mission's view that the exit poll data hardly posed a threat to the outcome of the vote, which the PM seconded, albeit with the caveat that things can "go wrong" with improperly-conducted exit polls. The Charge said the Mission would have to consult with IRI and the Gallup Organization on the data-sharing proposal, but cautioned that the key part of any exit poll was its neutrality, and its carrying out by an unbiased third party.

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COMMENT

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19. (C) Although we cannot be certain this new offer to permit the exit poll is completely genuine, or merely a tactic by the PM to save face if the poll is subsequently scrapped, we think we should react to the proposal in good faith. In this vein, we are already exploring the possibility of read-only data sharing that the PM proposed, without compromising the legitimacy of the poll. One should not forget that the PM's public support of the poll throughout means he has a stake in it being carried out. The fact that he has ostensibly bucked the president on this issue is truly remarkable, given the president's seniority and authority. It appears the PM, at least for the time being, has assuaged the president's concerns about the poll, and in doing so drawn a clear distinction between his and the president's governing style. End comment.  
FRAZIER